



# GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION MAGAZINE



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# Selected aims in teaching Geography at

## the Junior Secondary Level in Zimbabwe

by

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There are various factors that influence one's thinking when it comes to the description of aims in teaching geography at school level. Firstly, there are changes in the curriculum at the secondary school level. These involve longer schooling periods in that all children proceed from form 1 to form 4; the growing complexity of our society; the earlier maturation of pupils and the demands that our education system should be more socialistic in outlook. These have had the effect of widening the aims of secondary school geography.

Secondly, there are profound changes in academic geography. The last decade has seen changes that emphasise a philosophy and technique of study which is thought to be of more relevance and value to the education of children. These changes have originated at university level and have filtered down to school level. Those which have been found suitable in schools put more emphasis on explanation and understanding; the development of mental skills such as perception and analysis; concepts and generalisations; inductive and empirical relevance by relating learning to the real world of the learner. As Milner (1975) has pointed out, new courses at university level have introduced specialism in our subject and this adds to the problems of teachers in the changing schools of today. This change in the philosophical basis of geography reflects the idea that an educated person is distinguished by a quality of mind and not by the possession of a body of facts and information. Geography has become a thinking subject.

Thirdly, there is the influence of the contemporary school context - whether geography is going to remain as a separate subject or as a contributor to an interdisciplinary approach. Fitzgerald (1974) argues that because Geography had been slow to carry out, at school level, the changes taking place at university, ill-defined subject groups such as Environmental Studies or Interdisciplinary Studies have developed. There is a fear that if these trends are allowed to continue, Geography as a school discipline might disappear altogether. To keep our subject as a contributor to the education of children, we have to treat it as a science; an approach which is in line with the 'new geography'. In an interdisciplinary approach, geographical skills, concepts and ways of thinking cannot be taught except in a haphazard manner.

In the face of all these changes, it has become more important than ever to be clear about one's aims in teaching Geography. R.S. Peters (1966) has reiterated;

'To ask questions about the aims of education is ... a way of getting people to get clear about and focus their attention on what is worthwhile achieving'. (p.28)

Failure to be clear about our aims exposes us to a number of risks. It is all too easy in the momentum of everyday school life to forget one's aims and to concentrate on the subject itself. To disregard one's aims is to become narrow and to teach without thought. Bennets (1972) warns that if this happens, we unknowingly restrict the opportunity we make available to pupils; that we have no sound base on which we can design the curriculum, subject matter and method; and that if we are not clear about our objectives, we cannot evaluate the achievements of our students but would find ourselves confusing the subject matter with the educational objectives.

In Geography we aim to teach children particular cognitive skills which are of value to them and have application outside the classroom. Bacon (1968) calls this a working understanding of essential Geography skills. Equipped with these, the children will continue to gain in Geographical knowledge long after their formal education has ended. Since education can only provide a beginning, the best beginning is one that makes possible the continued growth of knowledge. Some of these skills are concerned with map reading which are skills especially important in Geography. These include the ability to visualise terrain from a variety of symbols, and the understanding of scale, direction and co-ordinates using Ordnance Survey Maps. The interpretation of maps requires the ability to analyse relationships between two or more distributions, which in many ways is the essence of Geography. Long and Robertson (1966) point out that the ability to use maps opens the door to location over the whole world. A variety of maps appear in many different publications as well as in television news broadcasts and weather forecasts. Each child meets maps in one form or another. Map reading and other forms of geographical study such as picture interpretation are important if finding out about places is the objective, rather than telling pupils facts that they can find out for themselves. Bacon (1968) states that the sharpening of powers of observation adds richness to life, for;

'Having learnt to "read the landscape" one never again travels with blinkers.' (p.24)

Other skills are required for weather reading and recording. Geography aims to develop observational skills; judgement; analysis; application and synthesis; powers of reasoning; memory and imagination. This is stressed by Tulipper (1965) and Marchant (1971). Marchant adds that this is to be used for the acquisition of knowledge which is firmly rooted and quickly available, so that a pupil will have the wish and the ability to learn more and to understand better. In each case it is important for us to spell out clearly the skills we are aiming for so as to avoid thinking of general abilities.

Knowledge of the home area can be considered as an aim for several reasons. Teaching material is readily available and it is the area in which most children are likely to travel. It is in accordance with modern educational thinking to begin from the known and progress to the unknown. But most important, it gives the opportunity of seeing the reality of Geography. This knowledge of the home area is essential for an informed consideration of many current problems such as the location of main roads, conservation of the countryside and so on. The knowledge is needed to understand and appreciate the land in which the pupil lives.

Introducing pupils to scientific methods in the study of Geography is relevant and valuable since Geography is increasingly scientific in approach. This calls for scientific methods of investigation, observation, hypothesis

formulation, testing and theory formation. Since a scientific enquiry is problem-oriented, we must stimulate our pupils to ask searching questions, teach them appropriate methods of data analysis, encourage and guide them to formulate hypotheses and then to test and evaluate these hypotheses. Pupils need to know the purpose of the enquiry and the limitations of the methods used and the conclusions arrived at. Mathematical skills introducing pupils to precision and objectivity through measurement and quantification, should be used as means to an end and not as ends in themselves. They can only be of value if pupils understand why they are being used and what the methods can and cannot do. We need to modify our approach according to the age and ability of the pupils. Even the models and systems approach used in more advanced Geography courses can be modified to suit the junior secondary school child. For example, it is possible to use the urban rent theory to guide pupils towards making generalisations about retail distribution in the central area of a town, or to use systems analysis to study such topics as pollution and conservation. In case studies, a farm can be studied so that it can contribute to the understanding of the working of farms as a system with inputs, throughputs and outputs, whose activities are a response to a variety of social and economic forces. The development of an attitude of objectivity would include learning to formulate, to test and to determine the validity of hypotheses.

The scientific inquiry also has relevance in fieldwork studies. As Everson (1969) points out, the scientific approach can be used for the purposeful collection of data to test general ideas which the pupil is investigating. Fieldwork may also be used to identify problems for further investigation. This entails using the landscape as a laboratory, where pupils are engaged in the process of discovery and in the formulation of useful and valid generalisations. Here there is the joy of discovery, which is a highly motivating experience. Knowledge is much more valuable and meaningful when acquired in this manner. Maps, charts, books, pictures, and diagrams can also be used in the scientific inquiry.

The development of geographical concepts is perhaps the most important reason for regarding the discipline as an educational vehicle. It produces valuable ideas that further our understanding of reality and it is essential that we identify the organising concepts and principles that summarise the geographers' current thinking. The spatial viewpoint has emerged as the main focus of geographical research and it has been highly productive of general ideas. Concepts borrowed from Geometry and the behavioural sciences have been used to describe spatial patterns and produce change in space. Spatial concepts which have been developed have relevance in a wide field of interests. Some of these concepts are spatial distribution, distance, accessibility, nodality, networks and interactions. There are also what can be termed high level concepts such as resource utilisation and conservation, pollution and the environment. The man-environment interaction has been combined in a systems framework with spatial viewpoints.

Society-centred aims have focussed on the idea of citizenship. Geography can contribute to our understanding of the function of a community and the close links between different communities. This involves the development of attitudes and the cultivation in the pupil of love for his country and his sympathy for other peoples and their lands, with whom his country must co-operate in different ways if it is to play its part in the world society. Case studies of world problems is one way of trying to achieve this end. We should take care not to encourage the 'them and us' attitude. The problem with such aims is that Geography teachers are generally not well versed in the techniques involved in changing and developing attitudes. We have to

rely on current psychological research on this topic. We cannot measure or demonstrate the attainment of these attitudes but we can compile (on the basis of observation) characteristics displayed by pupils who have undergone a programme, for example, on social sensitivity, and describe what these pupils would be able to do, think and feel. So even though we are unable to measure these objectives, it does not mean that we should forget them as many values in education cannot be measured. We must, however, be careful not to fall in the trap of thinking in terms of what we believe Geography can do instead of what it really does.

Other aims are linked to the idea that we should cultivate in our pupils the principles of scientific socialism that our country has adopted as the best way to push ahead in our development. Our subject can contribute to the attainment of such a goal by emphasising the collective or group co-operation in learning situations.

Some of the aims described above might carry an air of vagueness. After all, deciding on aims involves value judgements, but the main point is that some general aims tend to be unclear. We should distinguish between general and specific aims. If we are going to aim at something, it should be a visible target, a series of achievable goals or objectives which are rooted in the immediate teaching situation. For example, a lesson is broken into small units, each with its own objectives to be achieved before the next step is reached.

The problem with general aims is, as Graves (1975) has pointed out, that they assume a gradual increase in understanding over a number of years and what is worse, these aims will have no meaning to most of our pupils until they have reached an advanced stage of mental and/or social maturity, which cannot be until they have left school. Pupils are more likely to understand the meaning and value of immediate specific objectives and, as we know, this is a very strong motivational force. What we must do is to first clarify our general aims and then work out a series of achievable objectives for the immediate teaching situation in the hope that the achievement of numerous specific objectives will eventually enable the general aims to be reached.

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